



**Report of the Chief Social Services Officer
Report to Scrutiny Board**

Date: 7/9/06 Session two

Subject: Inquiry into Adoption Services in Leeds

Electoral Wards Affected:

Specific Implications For:

- Ethnic minorities
- Women
- Disabled people
- Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

1. This report is to the Scrutiny Board group which is looking into adoption services in Leeds and provides information for session two of the group which is meeting on 7th September as addressed in the terms of reference (paragraph 5.2) of the Scrutiny Board inquiry.

2. Background

2.1 The adoption services in Leeds are provided by the Social Services and National Children's Homes (NCH) and Barnardo's . Only Social Services are legally able to provide the full range of services to adopters and children. NCH and Barnardo's provide services to adopters by assessing them and supporting them. They then sell the adoptive placements to Social Services anywhere in the country. Private agencies are not allowed under current law.

2.2 The adoption services fit within the Children's strategy for Leeds and conform to the "Every Child Matters" agenda and the Adoption Implementation Plan is attached as an addendum. (addendum 1)

3. Purpose Of This Report

The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Scrutiny Board inquiry on adoption on 7th September 2006 (session 2)

Main Issues

4. Profile of prospective adopters and adoptees in Leeds

4.1 The Social Services registers a varying number of adopters each year and equally accepts a varying number of children for adoption. The historical record is attached as an addendum. There has been a decrease in the number of people being approved as adopters in recent years but the numbers are now increasing again. (addendum 2).

4.2 There has been a consequent decline in the number of adoptions (78 in 2003/4, 81 in 04/05 and 53 in 05/06). In this current year (06/07) so far 13 children have been adopted. A new factor is the new Guardianship Orders (which is explained in addendum 6 to the previous report for session one), of which there were two last year but seven so far this year. DfES has anticipated this by announcing that they will assess performance of Social Services Departments in this area by adding the number of adoptions to the number of special guardianship orders. By this standard we are on course for a significant improvement in our performance.

4.3 For information an anonymised list of approved adopters waiting for a match and a similar list of children are attached as addenda. (addendum 3 and addendum 4)

5. The funding of the adoption service

The budget for this financial year is attached as an addendum (addendum 5) and is hopefully self explanatory. The inter agency budget is set aside to buy placements from other agencies, usually the voluntary agencies mentioned above.

The need to pay independent Chairs for the adoption panels has required us to increase the budget for the panels.

6. Underlying reasons for current performance and measures being taken to improve.

There are a number of reasons why the number of adoptions has reduced in the last two years:

- The effect of decisions taken at one point in time on policy or practice take a year or two to be felt because of the length of time between people registering an interest as an adopter and being approved and matched with a child. The current situation has probably arisen from a decision taken two years ago to prioritise long term fostering applications, the lack of which was causing a bottleneck in the short term fostering placements.

At that time the teams on the section did both fostering and adoption and prioritizing in one part of the work would cause a drop in figures in another. I have since restructured the section into fostering teams and adoption teams so that this cannot happen again.

- The types of children needing adoption have changed so that more children with complex needs, in terms of behaviour, age and cultural heritage (particularly mixed

heritage children) are needing adoption but it takes longer to find, assess and match them with adopters. The adoptive parents also wait longer (up to two years) before applying for adoption orders because they want to be sure that their relationship with the child has stabilized and any major problems have been sorted out and that they can cope in the future.

- A shortage of fieldworkers two years ago did mean that adoption was not prioritized and led to considerable delay in report writing and responding to potential matches. This situation has now improved.
- The introduction of the requirement to give adoptive applicants the opportunity to attend their adoption panel has slowed down the panel approval process and a third adoption panel is needed but we have not yet been able to achieve this because of the need to have a third medical adviser. Negotiations with the Health Authority to resolve this are under way.
- Several inspection reports have commented that the section is understaffed for the size of its task. The opportunity of a central government ring fenced grant was taken to create an adoption support team and to create two extra mainstream posts last year. It is expected that the effect of this will not be felt till later this year as it has taken considerable time to fill these posts.

We have now addressed the causes of the reduction in the number of approvals and consequent adoptions and the numbers of approved adopters are now rising again.

7. The work of the regional consortium

This has been addressed in the previous session and written information supplied with the report for that session. Our representative on that consortium will be attending this session and can answer any queries.

Membership of the consortium has given us access to a wider range of potential placements for adoption.

8. The work of the post adoption support service

This department has led in this area of work and we have had a specialist post for it for some years. The ring fenced grant three years ago allowed us to create a team of workers to develop this work. Information on the service is attached as an addendum (addendum 8) and the team manager of this team will attend this session.

It is planned that this new service will enable us to:

- provide support to adopters now experiencing difficulties with children they may have adopted some years ago. It is now recognized that adopting children who are no longer babies presents extra challenges to parents and that some will need dedicated support. This includes the other children of adopters and we offer support to them as well.

- The awareness that we can offer support at any time in the future will encourage some people to consider adopting older children and children who may present some challenges.
- Give advice and support to other professionals who may be supporting adopted children and their parents in difficulty.

We hope this will increase the number of children adopted in the long term, especially those hitherto considered unadoptable. This will not produce a large number of adoptions but will be a significant improvement of service to children who might otherwise grow up in care.

The three year plan for this service is attached as an addendum (addendum 9).

9. Recommendation

Members of the Scrutiny Board Inquiry into adoption are asked to note the information presented in this report and its appendices to the second session of 7th September 2006.